NOTES

More on Alligators in the Sewers

In a recent note published in the *Journal of American Folklore* (92[1979], 335–338), Loren Coleman described his efforts to discover the origin of the legend about alligators in the sewers of New York City. He found a 1935 newspaper article about some kids discovering an alligator in a sewer, but was unable to come up with any further documentation, or any explanation for why the folktale did not surface until the 1960's. I think I can provide this information.

In 1959 a book entitled *The World Beneath the City* was published by Lippincott. Written by Robert Daley, it is a history of the problems involved in the development of the network of utilities underneath Manhattan Island. And in the midst of the stories of engineering problems and political deals is a chapter entitled "Alligators in the Sewers" (see pp. 187–189). It is based on the author's interviews with Teddy May, who had been Commissioner of Sewers in New York for some thirty years.

According to May, sewer inspectors first reported seeing alligators in 1935, but neither May nor anyone else believed them. "Instead, he set men to watch the sewer walkers to find out how they were obtaining whisky down in the pipes." Persistent reports, however, perhaps including the newspaper item discovered by Coleman, caused May to go down to find out for himself. He found that the reports were true. "The beam of his own flashlight had spotted alligators whose length, on the average, was about two feet."

May started an extermination campaign, using poisoned bait followed by flooding of the side tunnels to flush the beasts out into the major arteries where hunters with .22 rifles were waiting. He announced in 1937 that the 'gators were gone. Reported sightings in 1948 and 1966 were not confirmed.

However, there is no mention of "blind, albino" alligators, and May suggests that the baby alligators were dumped down storm drains rather than "flushed down the toilet."

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